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## Artist Francesco Clemente's Ethereal Bodies

A Vienna museum surveys the career of the 1980s art star.

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Francesco Clemente, 'Hermaphrodite' (1985).  
PHOTO: AFRANCESCO CLEMENTE/ALBERTINA/JABLONKA COLLECTION

In the early 1980s, New York's brash downtown art scene got a bit more elegant with the arrival of Francesco Clemente, an Italian painter and graphic artist known for his vivid yet ethereal treatments of the human figure. Barely 30, Mr. Clemente settled down with his young family in a loft on lower Broadway and soon became a leader in the art world's turn away from conceptual art and minimalism, helping to usher in a figurative movement that just about everyone, other than Mr. Clemente himself, likes to call Neo-Expressionism.

Today Mr. Clemente, 70, is still going strong, while many of his friends and collaborators of the period are gone. On July 27, Vienna's Albertina Museum will open "Francisco Clemente," a career survey that includes 78 of the artist's works, from a 1979 self-portrait to a 21st-century take on traditional tarot cards.

Long known for its world-class collection of drawings and prints, the Albertina has undergone a radical transformation over the last few decades, adding paintings on canvas and other media and opening a new building, the Albertina Modern, in 2020. Mr. Clemente, whose show is installed in the original 18th-century palace, arguably fits into both the old and new versions of the museum. "A master of paper," as guest curator Rafael Jablonka calls him, Mr. Clemente is known for his pastel, gouache and watercolor works, some of which use multiple sheets to reach giant dimensions, as well as his oil paintings.

The exhibition opens with black-and-white lithographic proofs of Mr. Clemente's fanciful and foreboding illustrations for "The Departure of the Argonaut" (1983-86), an English translation of an Italian World War I diary. Then the show jumps ahead some two decades to a set of works inspired by Mr. Clemente's visits to Brazil, when he was initiated into Afro-Brazilian rituals that combine animism and Christianity. A dozen reddish-brown pastels from 2007 present faces without eyes, a dancing figure covered with circles of light, and a mysteriously filled glass. In the large, colorful painting "Southern Cross" (2006), massive fingers frame a mottled sky.

Mr. Jablonka, now an Austria-based freelance curator and collector, operated an influential German art gallery from 1988 to 2018, where he showcased Mr. Clemente and other artists associated with the 1980s, including American painters Eric Fischl and Ross Bleckner. The occasion for the new show is his recent long-term loan to the Albertina of his personal art collection, including the Brazilian works. Other works on view, including the selections from his tarot-card series, are on loan from Mr. Clemente himself.

Around a quarter of the images in "Francisco Clemente" include the artist's self-depictions, in which gender and sexuality have often been major themes. The nude self-portrait in an oversize 1979 drawing is clearly a man, but the figure's litheness and passive pose suggest something feminine. The preening, bearded 7 1/2-foot figure in the 2005 oil painting "Self-Portrait as an Androgynae" suggests a neutered colossus.

"I never paint portraits from memory or photographs," said Mr. Clemente in a phone interview this week. "Photographs have a deceitful pretense of objectivity, and our visual memory is unreliable." Mr. Clemente said that he uses mirrors to create his self-portraits, including opaque mirrors with a darkened surface. To paint the celebrity portraits in his watercolor-and-gouache tarot-card series, he asked subjects like author Fran Lebowitz and artist Jasper Johns to pose for him. In another example of self-portraiture, Mr. Clemente inserted himself as the vagabond-like Fool, typically regarded as a tarot deck's first card.

FRANCESCO CLEMENTE

Mr. Clemente is often thought of as an emblem of the 1980s, when he collaborated and hobnobbed with art stars like Andy Warhol and Jean-Michel Basquiat. Among his best-known works were a set of murals commissioned to decorate the exclusive '80s nightclub Palladium. But the Vienna show suggests he was also ahead of his time. His career-long series of self-portraits might now seem like a hyper-refined Instagram feed, and his interest in gender continuums—richly expressed in the giant work-on-paper “Hermaphrodite” (1985), which helps wind down the Vienna show—couldn’t be timelier.

In May of this year, Christie’s New York sold Mr. Clemente’s “The Fourteen Stations, No. XI,” from a series of early 1980s paintings, for \$1.86 million, more than 10 times the presale estimate and triple Mr. Clemente’s previous record, set in 2001. Michael Baptist, a specialist in postwar and contemporary art at Christie’s, says that Mr. Clemente has been undervalued, and he thinks the recent sale indicates the beginning of a general increase in prices. The market will get another test next month, when Christie’s mounts a combined exhibition and sale devoted to the artist in Southampton, N.Y.



Portraits of Fran Lebowitz (left) and Philip Glass from Francesco Clemente's tarot card series.  
PHOTO: FRANCESCO CLEMENTE